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AUTHOR Rohatyn, Dennis
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ABSTRACT

Fallacies are defined as incorrect patterns of reasoning, and can be classified into two chief classes--formal fallacies, which involve violation of a rule, and informal fallacies, such as hasty generalizations or arguing from ignorance. Inspired by George Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" and his book "1984," William Lutz coined the term doublespeak, "language which pretends to communicate but really doesn't." Doublespeak commits many fallacies, the most disturbing one being that it makes it more difficult for everyone (speakers and audiences, arguers and bystanders) to be fully human. Lutz divides doublespeak into four types: euphemism, jargon, gobbledygook or bureaucratese, and inflated language. The common denominator in all four of its varieties is self-deception--lies, mystification, and inconsistency. Inconsistency and self-defeat underlie the phenomenon of doublespeak, since everything said is impossible and cannot even be coherently described. Because the proponents and practitioners of doublespeak do not notice that it is self-defeating, and that they are committing linguistic and moral suicide, others must prevent doublespeak from having the last word. (Notes and 25 references are appended.) (MM)

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The Fallacies of Doublespeak

Dennis Rohatyn

University of San Diego, San Diego, CA 92110

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I. Fallacies

For the past 15 years fallacy pedagogy has undergone a quiet revolution. It used to be easy to teach the subject of fallacies; lately (for very good reasons) it has gotten harder. I will explain why. First, what is a fallacy? Some textbooks define it as an incorrect pattern of reasoning (Seech 1987). But what makes it incorrect? What causes or produces logical error? In short, why is a fallacy a fallacy? In lieu of an answer, the textbook tradition divides fallacies into two chief classes: formal and informal. Formal fallacies involve violation of a rule: denying the antecedent and affirming the consequent are the best known examples. Informal fallacies are ones that aren't formal--or all the rest! Informal fallacies comprise several subcategories, including fallacies of irrelevance (ad hominem attacks, "straw arguer," appeals to pity or force, appeals to the people or to authority, arguing from ignorance), semantic fallacies (equivocation, composition, division), inductive fallacies (hasty generalization, post hoc, false cause) and fallacies of presumption (begging the question, suppressed evidence). The question is, what (if

anything) do these different types of fallacy have in common? A mere list or grouping of mistakes gives no clue as to what makes them taboo.

In recent years, logicians have devoted considerable energy to analyzing what fallacies are, as opposed to taking them for granted, as though their meaning were self-evident (Walton 1984). One invaluable set of criteria for identifying a fallacy (Kahane 1988) claims that fallacies make arguments invalid, unsound or inaccurate. Using this approach, there are at least three ways in which fallacies can and do occur. One is when we make inferences or draw conclusions that simply don't follow from a given set of premises. Another is to accept one or more false assumptions or to adopt a false conclusion, not as a tentative hypothesis or thought experiment but finally and in earnest. A third way is by abusing or perverting the life of reason, as happens (e.g.) when we hide relevant facts from an audience or dishonestly assume just what needs to be proved. This third category reflects the etymology of the word 'fallacy,' whose Latin root means 'to deceive.'

This typology of fallacies is not exhaustive, but it helps. You may wonder why there is so much fuss about fallacies, or why it has taken so long for philosophers to abandon traditional classifications and seek better ones. There are two reasons for this, one technical, the other political. The technical reason is that many arguments look fallacious but aren't. For example, suppose a defense

attorney assails the credibility of an eye-witness to an auto accident: "Mr. X says that he saw car A viciously slam into car B. But Mr. X is a habitual drunkard. Therefore, I ask the jurors to disregard X's testimony." Is this (not) an attack on X's character? If so, (why) isn't it fallacious? Or consider Christ's admonition to those who were about to pelt the adulteress: 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' We might respond, do two wrongs make a right? Yet if Christ did commit a fallacy, he was justified in doing so (Rohatyn 1987). Thus either there are times when a fallacy isn't a fallacy, or else we must revise our definitions in an ad hoc manner to admit (or prohibit) exceptions to each purported rule as they arise. One method is messy, the other clumsy. The moral is that except for formal fallacies, we cannot erect an algorithm or provide (what logicians call) a decision-procedure to establish the (in)correctness of a given argument in advance. We can only determine this contextually, case by case, relying on rules of thumb rather than hard-and-fast rules which require no interpretation.

Some logicians (Lambert and Ulrich 1980) find this fact so distressing that they ban fallacies from their curriculum. But that's like pretending (as the United States did for twenty-five years) that mainland China doesn't exist because their ideology differs from ours. Which brings me to my second reason for the growth of interest in fallacies, both in research and in the

classroom: the changed climate of American higher education since Vietnam and Watergate. Like many of their academic counterparts, since 1974 if not earlier philosophers have (re)discovered the real world, bringing their conceptual skills to bear on problems of nuclear war and peace, world hunger, ecology, and economic justice, not to mention medicine, law and other professions in which life and death issues are routinely at stake. The "legitimation crisis" of North American society has spurred my discipline to stop being smug about itself. (Note 1) As a consequence, logic, once taught as a high-powered mathematics course primarily intended to prepare prospective graduate students for the rigors of Russell, Whitehead and Frege, is no longer detached from its modest applications, including serving as an intellectual antidote to gratuitous suffering inflicted by (e.g.) advertisers, politicians and bureaucrats. [That's enough scapegoating for one afternoon!]

Conversely, logicians have become far more careful about whom they accuse of error and on what grounds. Twenty years ago, teachers and authors who prepared drills and exercises did not hesitate to compile a list of 4-line quotations to illustrate various fallacies, as though they were discrete specimens to be housed under glass. Today we quote an entire passage or a chapter if need be, give the students enough background to understand the subject and then ask them to perform a sensitive argument reconstruction and diagnosis (Johnson and Blair 1983, Fogelin 1986). No

one goes fallacy hunting, though we do do find fallacies in abundance. When an argument is broken we try to repair it, and we encourage our students to do likewise. This is known as the principle of charity, or giving one's opponent the benefit of the doubt. And that's as much a part of our moral code as the avoidance of fallacies.

II. Doublespeak

Inspired by Orwell's essay "Politics and the English Language" and by 1984, William Lutz coined the term 'doublespeak' to refer to ". . . language which pretends to communicate but really doesn't. . . . It is language which conceals or prevents thought" (Lutz 1973), just as the Party in Oceania maintained the chilling yet self-refuting proposition that 'orthodoxy is unconsciousness.' Lutz divides current doublespeak into four principal kinds: euphemism, jargon, gobbledygook or bureaucratese, and inflated language. (Note 2) He is second to none in his passion for collecting examples of each, while monitoring the behavior of agencies and individuals who practice (and sometimes preach) doublespeak. Lutz is to linguistic sanity what Ralph Nader is to consumer rights. I am proud to be associated with the Committee on Public Doublespeak, and to share in its whistle-blowing activities. But there is more to doublespeak than exposing fraud. For example, as Lutz concedes (Lutz 1984), jargon is not always meant to obfuscate or to keep lay people at arm's length from experts. Nor is it pseudo-communication for those in the

know (e.g., in high-energy physics). Jargon has its place, provided it does not crowd or drown out other forms of speech and discourse. Too much jargon is evil, but so is too little. Moreover, some forms of jargon cannot be translated into ordinary idioms without loss of precision and efficiency. This does not excuse the antics of doublespeakers (e.g.) in American government, nor does it (in Orwell's words) defend the indefensible. Instead it avoids lunging from one extreme to another, lest we commit the fallacy known as black/white or false dichotomy.

Likewise, euphemisms are ". . . designed to alter our perception of reality." But is this always bad? Isn't that what we do as parents, teachers and to each other? Moreover, isn't tact a form of euphemism? If so, is it a semantic and/or a moral vice? Should we always be 100% honest with people no matter how it hurts them or embarrasses us? Clearly not, nor does Lutz suggest that. Then how do we decide when and why euphemisms are wrong? There's no simple answer, and certainly no recipe or formula. Some euphemisms are harmful and despicable, while others are not. As Aristotle noted long ago, the job of the discriminating critic is to tell which is which, while being aware that every judgment (s)he makes is fallible or defeasible. (Note 3) As with fallacies, we must rely on a contextual standard, since an absolute one is simply unavailable. Indeed, a "mechanical" procedure for detecting euphemisms would instantly trivialize the subject. It might

even harm its users rather than protecting them from error. Fortunately, human language is too complex to permit such simplifications to work.

III. Fallacies and Doublespeak

If the preceding discussion has taught us anything, it is that comparing doublespeak to fallacies involves more than matching members on two or more lists, as though (forgive the cliché) we were ordering food from a Chinese menu. When I proposed this paper months ago, despite my years of experience I fully expected to say something like 'euphemism and inflated language are semantic fallacies, jargon is an indirect appeal to authority, and gobbledygook commits the fallacy of vagueness. QED.' Now I realize how naive I was about facile treatments of argument pathology. The moral is that anyone who is still "committed" to traditional fallacy pedagogy should be committed (sic), before (s)he commits more fallacies than the textbooks enumerate! However, it would be equally rash to dispense with tradition altogether. As my colleague Dorothy Berger remarks, even the best cook uses or consults a cook-book every now and then. We do so, not out of weakness or faulty memory but in order to test our strategy before it's too late. In confronting novelty or danger, the best training in the world is hopelessly inadequate. Yet without it we are lost. To spark an insight or generate the intuition needed to resolve a dilemma, prior guidelines mean both everything and nothing. Whether we set out to master

fallacies, to examine doublespeak, or to do anything (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1986), it is advisable, indeed necessary, to start with a cook-book, provided that eventually you learn how to operate without one, not just in an emergency but all of the time. That's what 'self-reliance' means. That is [also] the humble yet profound meaning of self-transcendence: of learning rules which eventually enable us to avoid following them blindly. It follows that contempt for rules is as misguided as rule-worship, and just as disastrous.

IV. A Special (Yet General) Case

We must beware of imposing an artificial unity on doublespeak. However, it does not follow that doublespeak has no essence. Since doublespeak is ". . . language which is at variance with its real or its purported meaning" (Lutz 1973), in all four of its varieties the common denominator is (self-)deception: lies, mystification, and (above all) inconsistency. I want to say several things about inconsistency. Ever since Aristotle logicians have tried to prove that contradictions are untenable. Unfortunately, such proofs are circular, since they presuppose the principle of non-contradiction or something equivalent to it. (Note 4) Logicians contend that 'from a contradiction, anything follows.' That is true: if we assume both p and ~p, it is easy to prove both q and ~q, r and ~r and so on, to infinity. But why is that objectionable? Because (we usually argue) some propositions

are true while others are false. Because not every proposition we utter or propound is as (likely to be) true as the next. Because abolishing or suspending the law of non-contradiction (LNC), as Hegel attempted to do, would lead to a night in which all cows are black, and all distinctions equally (in)valid. This is the fictional universe of 1984. As both Goldstein and O'Brien (who may or may not be the same person) describe it, it is a world governed entirely by two axioms:

I. Whatever the Party says, is right.

II. Every statement is both true and false simultaneously.

A little thoughtcrime suffices to show that I. and II. entail

III. Whatever the Party says, is wrong.

and also

IV. The Party says that whatever the Party says, is wrong.

and also

V. Axiom II is (both true and) false.

No wonder Orwell's protagonist (Winston Smith) goes mad just trying to comprehend Party logic, let alone abide by it. Granted, as he develops political consciousness Winston tries repeatedly to defy the law. But in Oceania there are no laws! Hence his or (by implication) anyone's rebellion

is pointless, futile and more or less doomed from the outset. Only the reader can escape from the worst of all possible worlds, not just by closing the book but by insuring that it remains a [nightmare] fantasy.

Let me share two reflections concerning this scenario. One is that it paralyzes the Party even more than its victims. The other is that knowing that makes no difference to institutions or people who are bent on complete (self-)destruction. Aristotle thought that anyone who denied the LNC was either a sophist or a fool, but in any case a hypocrite: "for one is not indifferent to all things alike when one wants a drink of water" (Metaphysics 1008b20-21). Thus he devised a pragmatic test for would-be adherents of the law of contradiction (LC). If they really mean what they say, let them try to live by or up to its dictates, not just to debate it abstractly or espouse it as a (substitute) logical norm. Once they do try they are guaranteed to fail, hence to give away their utter inability to practice what they preach. Aristotle expresses himself quite vehemently: "But clearly no man who says these things . . . really is so stupid. For if he wants to go to Megara, why does he go there instead of staying where he is? Why doesn't he . . . wander into any well or fall into any abyss that happens to be there, instead of carefully avoiding it, if he really thinks falling in equally good and not good?" (ibid. 1008b12-17)

From this viewpoint, we needn't fear our inability to prove the LNC. The burden of proof is on those who deny it (or who both deny and affirm it!). Their (not so) clever theoretical alternative dissolves as soon as we stop arguing against it and simply challenge them to put it into practice. We need not refute them; they refute themselves. They cannot cash in their ideas; should they dare to put their money where their mouth is, both will wind up lying (sic) on the ground. This is very reassuring, but is it true? As a child of the 20th century and a disciple of Orwell, Lutz cannot afford the luxury of Apollonian optimism. He knows that a universe filled with doublespeak (and emptied of everything else) is impossible and cannot even be coherently described. If doublespeak were all there was we could not say 'doublespeak' (unless the Party commanded it!). That is why 1984 mimics Newspeak but is composed in Oldspeak. Yet there are times when we almost succeed in touching negative infinity or in annihilating discourse, not just in Nazi Germany or during the Stalinist era but far closer to home and to the present moment. Lutz knows that doublespeak is insane yet undeniably real, and therefore all the more threatening to those whose sanity (as Orwell would say) is not yet a statistic. Lutz also knows that doublespeak is self-defeating, but its proponents and practitioners don't seem to notice, much less care about, linguistic (or moral) suicide. So it is up to him, and up to us, to prevent doublespeak from having the last word.

This suggests that the study of contradictions and of systems which exclude (or on occasion, include) them is central to the logical enterprise. Here as elsewhere it is important to avoid dogmatism. Quantum mechanics (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, Bell's inequality) justified the efforts of Lukasiewicz, Reichenbach and other pioneers of "many-valued logic" (Rescher 1969), who demolished the sacred "law" of excluded middle because it didn't fit certain physical (experimental) situations. This means that like fallacies, contradictions aren't always bad (or aren't always contradictions), even though we must never revise rules to suit a whim or take them lightly. The same is true of human ambivalence (love-hate relationships), where ordinary logic is often a poor guide to understanding our feelings and motives. Even so, we are a rational animal, not least in struggling to understand and (sometimes) approve of the ways in which we are irrational (Elster 1983). This means that even when reason fails to resolve or overcome a deep-seated paradox, we abandon reason at our immediate or long-range peril. Perhaps that is the deepest paradox of all. . . . Of course, it is easily explained, thanks to the paradox that human beings are paradox-generators! (Hofstadter 1979, 1985)

I have strayed from my topic, but only to return to it. Inconsistency is hardly the only form of doublespeak, yet it underlies the phenomena. As such it is both easy to spot and troublesome to remove, not least because (like

Aristotle, and despite his bluster) we have scruples about (not) giving every opponent a fair hearing, no matter how perverse, unfair or inconsiderate they may be. As in politics so in logic we must tolerate the intolerant, safeguarding the rights even (or especially) of those who would not think twice about trampling on the norms that make their very dissent possible. This seems foolish if not suicidal. Yet this and only this is noble. It keeps us slightly "above the brutes," i.e. above ourselves at those times wher we are brutes. This provides the concepts link between the concepts we have just critiqued. Like any fallacy, but perhaps more pointedly, doublespeak violates canons of (self-) respect in word and deed. Doublespeak commits many fallacies, yet in the end it commits just one: it makes it more difficult for everyone (speakers and audiences, arguers and bystanders) to be fully human. (Note 5) Difficult, yes, but as our discussion proves, not quite impossible. (Note 6)

Notes

1. More than any single work, Rawls (1971) sparked a revival of "applied" philosophy. Although Rawls began writing his book in 1955, its (long-awaited) appearance during the Nixon era partly explains its favorable reception.

2. Prof. Lutz informs me that his original four categories will soon expand to seven. Though a revised taxonomy will surely be useful, it does not affect our main points.

3. This dovetails nicely with George Bramer's remarks about justifying a lie or meeting the burden of proof when accused of deception. See his discussion (e.g., of Sissela Bok) in "Is Doublespeak Immoral?" at this (NCTE) conference.

4. If we cannot "prove" the LNC without arguing in a circle, how do we ever establish a criterion (let alone the supremacy) of rationality? For Aristotle and Leibniz, among others, this is a paramount problem. Fortunately, as the ensuing paragraphs will show, we don't need to choose between rationality and insanity, or to demonstrate that one is better than the other.

5. Thus we avoid having to verify an intent to deceive. However, I do not subscribe to the customary bifurcation between cogency and persuasion, which exalts the product of argument at the expense of process, treats

'rhetoric' as nothing but a dirty word, and ignores the reasons why we are so easily corrupted. To explain the latter I propose we turn to depth psychology, most notably, Robert J. Lifton's research on the (aberrant) principle of "doubling" (Lifton 1986).

6. My thanks to Bill Lutz, my fellow panelists George Bramer and John Beard and to the audience for a stimulating session.

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